

BACK TO ROOTS

French artist Mickael Obrenovitch draws inspiration from wood to create stunning masterpieces.

TEXT RANJIT JOSE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN PUDDY & ALINA VLASOVA

How has nature influenced your work?

I harbour a deep passion and respect for nature and wood. The slow and silent growth of this living material, which thrusts its roots deep into the ground and rises majestically up into the air, endlessly fascinates me. Living on only earth, air and water, wood is the perfect vehicle for me to impart my reflection of the world and my interpretation of the universe. I feel connected to nature by working through this medium. It is like a silent discussion with a venerable old person teaching me the respect and meaning of life. Nature is the quintessence of art. It is a personal quest to try to get the closer I can understand at least a small part of the answer. Our modern civilisation lost, step by step this connecting link with nature and its own nature. I trust we have much to learn from it and be in symbiosis and connected with it more than abusing or destructing it.



Artists have drawn from natural beauty for generations, but what are your influences?

I am not trying to copy or draw from nature. I am trying to [be] sublime and reveal the beauty and history of each piece as you can read its life as an open book on its surface. I consider each piece as a tree and each collection as a forest. They have different characters and meaning in a common symbiotic way. As with humans, they are individually different but try to work in a common goal for growing the society in which they live. I feel intimately connected with the organic sculpture movement artists: Constantin Brancusi's extreme sculptural abstractions; Jean Arp's work fluidity; Giacometti's mastery of raw matter; and Henry Moore's monumental body of work. I feel also intimately related to the history of ancient civilisations. The symbols that can be found in various types of primitive artistic expressions are a source of inspiration. This includes archaic Greek, Incas and Egyptian culture for the roots of human civilization.

How have your travels in Asia influenced your work using trees?

I was travelling for 3 months during a business trip in 2012, nothing related with wood or art even if I was a wood sculptor before that. By coincidence I took a vacation in Bali where I finally ended in Ubud. I fell in love with Ubud, probably one of the capitals of the world for woodcarvers. I met a famous wood carver artist named Leno who almost retired from work. We immediately had a connection through our passion



for wood and sculpture. For several days we talked about Bali *kopi* time. By coincidence I saw, before I left for home, a mountain of wood mixed with plants and clay in his garden which had been there for 20 years as if gestating and waiting for me. By coincidence, he suggested I stay in his place to work on this wood for a personal project. More than a work, I also found here in Bali a family, a new culture, to confront my self and my belief.

What are some of the criteria that you employ for your sculptures, especially since everything is based on teak tree roots from Java?

Those venerable roots I work with are, for some, more than 200 years old. It is part of the history and legacy of Java and Indonesia. Teak roots have a magnificent structure, natural characters and shape. It is hard wood, you cannot fight against it but you have to work with it. You need to understand the line of the wood and as a dialogue find the only way to sublime it. I carve as a dance with the soft part to reveal the surface and age of the history of the wood to confront to the drift part used by age and the natural element. Using the roots of trees is not a coincidence. Roots are the useless part of the wood industry. The Javanese rainforest is the lung of South East Asia, the second biggest forest in Indonesia. And during this last decade, the Indonesian rainforest has been over exploited and destroyed by the palm oil industry.

How do you convey the fragility of nature and wisdom to your visitors through this exhibit?

I try to confront this natural beauty piece of wood to the public. Hopefully the visitors will be fascinated by the amazing shapes and the natural beauty of the story of the surface line. Maybe some people will be moved and understand the way of my work and the message inside it. Each exhibition is a new chance to convince and be a vehicle to protect nature and legacy of the Indonesian rainforest.

01 & 02 LEGACY
Some of the wood Obrenovitch works with are over 200 years old.

03 ON DISPLAY
Some of his works are on display at the Sofitel Bali.

How does your work play out in the Indonesian scene?

I like to exhibit in Bali because it totally links with the roots of my materials and I do feel a real love for the place where this story started. But after "Le French May" in Macau, it was also totally surprising to see those magnificent natural roots confronting this hyper urbanised gambling city. I like the idea to show some roots to urban people, some of whom have never been, even for one day a forest. I expect more exhibitions in Asia in 2016 Hong-Kong, Singapore, Seoul and Tokyo. The Indonesian rainforest is the heritage of Asia.

Since it has been adopted at a luxury hotel, how does this work with a more corporate concept?

It is part of my message to bring nature and contemporary art to show them to a new audience familiar with to art venues. If people do not come to art, we can still bring art to people. Bali is really tourism oriented. Where can one find a better way than exhibiting in a famous luxury hotel to get a worldwide and local public and be related in the media. I cannot change the rules of the game of the world but I can still play with the cards we get. In fact I also trust deforestation is a political issue. Luxury hotels are visited by men and women of influence, I hope one day one of them will be moved by my work and my message and can work on it for largest of audiences.

What do you hope guests take away with a setting such as this?

I think from my experience in hotels, it is not that common to see abstract wood roots exhibited like that as contemporary art and not as furniture or design objects in luxury hotels. I hope this installation will [encourage] the visitor [to question] and he will be interested in knowing more about the message behind this. I trust these roots will bring a message by themselves to people from their magnificent unique characters as I was moved and invited to work on them. ④



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